A cognitive pragmatics of the phatic Internet

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ABSTRACT
Phatic interpretations are typically defined as those arising from an intention to create and maintain ties and social bonds, to exhibit desire of sociability towards others, rather than an intention to transfer substantive information. As such, they are not typical instances of communication in which the eventual relevance is centred upon the value of explicitly communicated content. This kind of phatic interpretation is important, since nowadays we are witnessing the so-called phatic Internet, in which the propositional content transferred to other users is increasingly irrelevant but the effects that this content generates (in terms of feelings of connection, of sociability, of group membership, of friends’ acknowledgment and mutual awareness, etc.) are utterly relevant. In this chapter, it will be argued that it is mainly feelings and emotions that are generated from phatic interactions (and phatic implicatures may also be derived), which demands an extension of the scope of analysis and new terminology. Specifically, the term phatic effects will be proposed and applied to Internet-mediated communication. These effects are devoid of the qualities of intentionality and propositionality, but are nevertheless essential to our understanding of why many users spend hours exchanging (apparently) irrelevant content with one another through the Net.

Keywords: phatic communication, phatic effects, Internet-mediated communication, relevance theory, contextual constraints, non-propositional effects.

1. Phatic communication

According to Malinowski (1943), phatic communication refers to a kind of speech in which social ties created by a mere exchange of words are more important than the informativeness of these words. Among its most typical manifestations, there are formulaic expressions of greeting, questions about the interlocutors’ health, well-being, or comments about apparently irrelevant facts or topics that may seem obvious or trivial, such as the weather. Examples include those listed in (1a-f):

(1) a. How are you?
   b. How ya doin’?
   c. Have a nice day!
   d. This train is really crowded.
   e. Do you come here often?
   f. Some weather we’re having.

Phatic utterances have traditionally been regarded as important for sociability but irrelevant for the transfer of relevant content. They are “primarily aimed at establishing and maintaining social bonds between individuals over and above the exchange of information and hence do not necessarily express any particular thought nor aim to exchange facts” (Vetere et al. 2009: 178). Most definitions, one way or another, emphasise the contrast between the lack of interesting information and the “social” relevance obtained from the phatic act of communication (see, for instance, Žegarac 1998: 328). The term “phatic” originated in Malinowski (1943 [1923]), who discovered that the subjects he analysed often used language for mere social intercourse, and the meaning of their words was not important but facilitated connection among people.
Under the “umbrella function” of bonding and fostering sociability, several authors have proposed specific functions of phatic communication. Among others, the following may be listed: (a) to provide indexical information for social categorization; to negotiate relationships and reinforce social structure (the validation and recognition function(s); Radovanovic and Ragneda 2012: 13); (b) to establish and maintain a positive atmosphere in interpersonal relations, especially during the opening and closing stages of interactions (Senft 1996); and (c) to fill the silence, to allow for the initiation of conversation (Fowler et al. 2013: 200).

As communication devoid of informative intention, phaticness has posed a challenge for pragmatics and, specifically, Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995; see below), and has even been assessed in negative terms due to this deficiency in informativeness (Coupland et al. 1992: 209-210). However, beyond its apparent simplicity, phatic communication “reveals a complex cultural, normative, cognitive and linguistic structure behind it, which speaks to its importance from communicational and sociological perspectives” (González Manzo 2014: 19). Indeed, its explanation demands an extension of analysis from the specific context of interaction into a broader social or cultural environment. In this sense, several authors have underlined the importance of society and culture in the kind of phatic communication that is allowed, expected, discursively constructed and finally interpreted. For example, phaticness is typically related to politeness (Meltzer and Musolf 2000: 98), which exhibits a clear social connotation. According to Padilla Cruz (2004), speakers may use phatic communication to assess the extent to which there is a mutuality of the politeness system in which the interaction is taking place, with a reliance that the hearer will use his/her cultural knowledge about the usage of phatic utterances and their effects in some communicative situations. This knowledge is, in Padilla Cruz’s view, part of the huge store of so-called “cultural metarepresentations” that determine the way in which those utterances achieve eventual relevance. In a more recent study, Padilla Cruz proposes the term social effects for those arising from phatic interactions and specifically regarding sociological variables, and leading to a more complete and accurate knowledge of the social reality in which people interact (2007: 706). Hence, even if the processing of phatic utterances does not significantly modify people’s knowledge of the world, they can still induce hearers to draw conclusions about the social reality in which they interact, which makes those utterances worth processing (Padilla Cruz 2009).

2. The phatic Internet

Phatic communication is an extremely important concept for scholars seeking to understand and describe the extent and depth of the interactions by today’s Internet users through online interfaces, typically devoid of informativeness but nevertheless relevant in the generation of a number of personal and social effects. As Miller (2008: 398) correctly claims in his seminal paper on phatic culture, we see a shift from dialogue and communication where the point of the network was to facilitate an exchange of substantive content, to a situation where “the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus. Here communication has been subordinated to the role of the simple maintenance of ever expanding networks and the notion of a connected presence.” What will be called phatic effects below, including feelings of connectedness, bonding, sociability, group membership, etc. certainly make up for the lack of interest that the thousands of virtual messages exchanged on a daily basis objectively possess.

The phatic Internet is also pervasive nowadays because the technologies for virtual
interactions were either initially designed for casual interactions or have subsequently acquired a phatic quality in their design, that is, have become phatic technologies, defined in Wang et al. (2011: 46) as follows: “A technology is phatic if its primary purpose or use is to establish, develop and maintain human relationships. The users of the technology have personal interactive goals.” The phatic connotation entails that the essence of these technologies is relationship building, rather than information transfer. As such, relationships and reinforcement of connection demand a constant supply and exchange of messages, typically through mobile phone interfaces (apps). In Licoppe’s (2004: 147) words,

rather than constructing a shared experience by telling each other about small and big events during the day and the week, interlocutors exchange small expressive messages signaling a perception, a feeling, or an emotion, or requiring from the other person the same type of expressive message. (...) calls tend to be as frequent as possible because the more that this presence maintained over a distance through mobile phones is continuous, the more reassuring it is in terms of the link.”

Interfaces such as Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp not only allow for non-stop interactions that make up for the interlocutors’ lack of physical co-presence, but have also implemented phatic affordances in their design (as is true of the Messenger option on Facebook). Apart from the actual spaces devoted to typed interactions, we find interface elements which trigger a phatic feeling of connectedness and presence, for example the “paralinguistic digital affordances” (Carr et al. 2016) on Facebook such as acknowledgements (“like”) and calls for attention (“poke”), together with automated linguistic reminders of initiated interactions (personal emails). These phatic elements serve the purpose of keeping users connected and aware of each other’s presence (Wang et al. 2012: 85). Placencia and Lower (2013: 639) propose the term phatic affirmation for these sources of connected presence such as Facebook’s “likes,” since these responses make it possible to maintain contact and support the relationship. As Varis and Bloommaert (2015: 35) correctly state, it is extremely important for users to be part of a group that “likes” and “shares” items posted by others. It does not really matter so much that groups of users are not held together by high levels of awareness or deeply shared values, as in traditional communities, but by loose bonds of weak ties and superficial interests; the phatic connotation still applies and, as will be argued below, compensates for the lack of relevance of exchanged content or for the barrage of messages that users have to process.

In order to get a more thorough picture of what influences the relevance of Internet-mediated acts of communication, the addition of two elements has been proposed in previous research, in order to complement the general relevance-theoretic (and cyberpragmatic) model of interpretation: contextual constraint and non-intended non-propositional effect (see Yus 2011b, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2017). The former is restricted to aspects that underlie or “frame” communication and interaction (i.e. they exist prior to the communicative activity) and constrain its eventual (un)successful outcome. These are important, since they have an impact on communication, specifically on (a) how much discourse is produced; (b) what kind of discourse is produced; (c) what kind of reaction is expected (sender user’s expectations); (d) what kind of discourse is possible (interface affordances); and (e) what kind of discourse is expected (audience validation).

By contrast, the term non-intended non-propositional effect refers to feelings, emotions, impressions, etc. which are not overtly intended, but are generated (“leaked”) from the act of communication, and add positively or negatively to the eventual relevance of the interpretation of the online discourse. Again, these are important, since they have an impact
on (a) the positive or negative outcome of users’ acts of communication; (b) the preference for a specific site, medium or channel; (c) why certain interactions are (un)profitable despite the lack of (or the existence of) interesting information; (d) one’s awareness of personal and social roles (through interactions); and (e) what kind of “residue” results from everyday acts of communication (and how it makes users feel).

As will be shown below, the prototypical cognitive pragmatics (i.e. relevance-theoretic) analysis of phatic communication is insufficient to account for what is really at stake when we talk about “the phatic Internet” and why this kind of communication has become so pervasive on the Net, keeping users glued to the screens. The addition of these two terms and the proposal of new possibilities for phatic interpretive outcomes will aid in explaining why users spend so much time exchanging apparently irrelevant messages and the impact of this kind of phatic interaction, at personal and social levels.

3. Reinterpreting phaticness on the Internet

The cognitive pragmatics (e.g. relevance-theoretic) analysis of phatic communication typically conceptualises this peculiar kind of interaction as (a) involving an intentional act; (b) centred upon the inference of information of a propositional kind; (c) exhibiting degrees (utterances may be phatic to a greater or lesser extent); (d) focusing on the speaker and his/her willingness to interact or socialise; and (e) transferring information which is objectively irrelevant or devoid of interest, but relevant in the effects it exerts on relationship, bonding or socialisation, and these effects are shaped as weak implicatures.

Although this is undeniably the case on some occasions, in this chapter it will be claimed that phaticness may exhibit other possibilities, and that these added possibilities are particularly useful to understanding the extent and depth of phatic communication on the Internet. In the next Sections, it will be specifically suggested that phaticness (a) may be generated in addition to what was specifically meant with an intentional act of communication; (b) may possess a non-propositional quality, in the shape of feelings, emotions, desires that are attached to the initially irrelevant (propositional) content communicated; (c) may also be obtained from non-phatic utterances; (d) may be addressee-centred beyond the addresser’s intentions; and (e) may be generated out of fully relevant content.

3.1. Phatic communication is intentional (but it may be unintentional)

Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) aims to describe the mental processes and inferential strategies that humans perform when making sense of what people intentionally communicate to one another. The identification of intentionality triggers the inferential activity of an evolved psychological ability that invariably selects the most relevant interpretation by making comparative judgments among competing interpretations and opting for the one that provides the highest interest (positive cognitive effects in relevance-theoretic terminology) in exchange for the least mental effort devoted to obtaining it. In general, hearers are expected to opt for the most relevant interpretation that fits these conditions of effects vs. effort.

However, searching for relevance is pervasive in human cognition and applies beyond the specific interpretation of intentionally produced verbal inputs. As the so-called cognitive
principle of relevance states, “human cognition is geared to the maximization of relevance” and therefore we apply this innate predisposition to multiple inputs to cognition, including unintentionally generated ones, and even those not related to human communication or merely exuded from the environment. Actually, in this chapter it will be argued that although Relevance Theory (and pragmatics in general) has mainly focused on how intentional propositional content is inferred in a context, the main relevance of phatic posts on the Net may actually lie in unintentionally generated effects, which is the case in some varieties of phatic interpretive outcomes. Consider the mobile phone message quoted in (2a) (Yus 2011a: 126):

(2) a. Hey! The idea of a party in the dunes sounds great. You and I have to get everyone to go to the offie to get some booze and we can meet at the usual place on Saturday to pick up Tom’s car.

b. Hey! The idea of a party [organizing it? go to it? what party? what kind of party? whose idea was it?] in the dunes [which dunes?] sounds great! You and I have to get everyone [whom?] to go to the offie [which off-licence?] to get some booze [which kind of drink? which brand?] and we can meet [who? all the mates?] at the usual place [which place?] on Saturday [which Saturday?] to pick up Tom’s car [which Tom?].

The main contribution of Relevance Theory has been to show how an apparently simple message such as (2a) demands a lot of inference in order to turn it into a fully relevant proposition (an interpretation), as indicated in the questions in the square brackets in (2b) that the addressee has to answer when interpreting (2a). My point is that even if the intention of the speaker is merely to coordinate the party and to lay out the steps to be taken, the addressee may not only turn (2a) into a relevant interpretation, but also infer a number of feelings and emotions related to the relationship with the speaker (feelings of connectivity, of being acknowledged, of group membership, etc.), which typically qualify as phatic but were probably not intended by the sender of the message. My point in this chapter is that unintended effects often constitute the main relevance of apparently trivial content that is so often exchanged on the Net (more on this below).

3.2. Phatic communication is propositional (but it may be non-propositional)

The prototypical form of communication according to Relevance Theory is propositional, that is, mentally represented and truth-evaluable. Hence, what is inferred from an utterance is either a proposition of an explicit kind (explicature) or of an implicated kind (implicature) or both. As Sperber and Wilson (1995: 57) explain, there is a very good reason to assume that what is communicated is propositional: it is relatively easy to say what propositions are, and how inference might operate over propositions. There is a lot of debate on how inference operates over non-propositional objects: say, emotions (see Schwarz-Friesel 2015). “Propositional contents and attitudes thus seem to provide the only relatively solid ground on which to base a partly or wholly inferential approach to communication.”

Explicatures differ from the information coded (interpretations being more or less explicit). This departure from coded meaning is even more evident in the case of implicatures, which may also be arranged on a continuum between strong and weak. Consider this example (adapted from Carston 2009):
(3) Tom: How was the party? Did it go well?
Ann: There wasn’t enough drink and everyone left early.

(4) a. There wasn’t enough alcoholic drink to satisfy the people at the party and so everyone who came to the party left it early, roughly before 2 o’clock.
b. The party did not go well at all.
c. Parties in which alcohol is scarce and people leave early are not good.
d. Ann thinks alcohol is essential in parties.
e. Ann only enjoys herself at parties when she is surrounded by many people.

When Tom interprets Ann’s utterance in (3), he decodes her words and enriches them at the explicit level: the concept drink is adjusted into alcoholic drink; the scope of everyone is narrowed to “everyone at the party,” and early has to be interpreted as the time in Tom and Ann’s culture in which leaving a party at a certain time is considered early. The resulting proposition could roughly be the explicature in (4a). Of course, as an answer, she also strongly implicates (4b) (an implicated conclusion), in the sense that it is clear that she backs up this implicature. This is obtained by pairing the explicature in (4a) with encyclopaedic information about what it takes for parties to be successful (the implicated premise in (4c)). However, Tom may also derive further implicatures, this time weaker (Ann probably did not intend to communicate them, but these are anyhow triggered by her utterance), such as (4d) or even weaker ones such as (4e), this time derived on his sole responsibility.

Relevance Theory pictures phatic communication, as communicated as propositions: “phatic communication is still a case of linguistic communication, because the linguistic properties of the utterance do play a role in the interpretation” (Žegarac 1998: 338). Specifically, it is communicated in the shape of weak implicatures, since its relevance does not lie in the information conveyed by the utterance (its explicature) but in the fact that the speaker has engaged in an act of communication: “An interpretation is phatic to the extent that it contains implicated conclusions which do not depend on the explicit content of the utterance” (Žegarac and Clark 1999: 331).

Although it is undeniable that the hearer may entertain and mentally represent the phatic intentions of the speaker as a weak implicature, my intuition is that on many occasions this is not the case. Instead, what often happens is that the hearer infers the speaker’s desire for connection, feeling of sociability, willingness to engage in a conversation, etc., in the shape of non-propositional elements attached to the propositional verbal content uttered (which is also inferred, even if not relevant in its own sake). In other words, phatic information usually gets attached to the verbal content inferred (when intended) or leaks from this content (when unintended but also eventually relevant; see Section 3.4 below). Consider a typically phatic dialogue such as (5b) in situation (5a):

(5) a. [John is at a party and sees Mary sitting in a corner. They do not know each other].
   b. John: [Approaching Mary] Nice party, isn’t it?
      Mary: [Smiling] Yes, very nice...
      John: [Pointing at a nearby chair] Mind if I sit down?
      Mary: No, no, go ahead.
   c. Mary thinks and mentally represents John’s intention to engage in a conversation in the shape of a weak implicature (e.g. “This guy wants to chat with me”).
d. Mary infers John’s desire for communication and feelings towards socialisation. These are attached to the utterance, which is also inferred but its content does not turn out to be relevant.

As was pointed out above, Mary may indeed derive and mentally represent the weak implicature in (5c), but very often what occurs is rather (5d), in which the utterance is processed for relevance and certain non-propositional desires and feelings get attached to the content inferred. Coupland (2003: 2) points in the same direction when he states that “it is widely acknowledged that all talk carries social and affective meaning, along with its representational or task-focused aspects.” And Padilla Cruz (2005: 214) writes about phatic utterances contributing to the bringing about of a feeling of solidarity and ties of union between interlocutors, a typically non-propositional effect derived from the inference of propositional content.

3.3. Phatic utterances may be more or less phatic (and they may also produce joint phatic and non-phatic interpretations)

It is commonly acknowledged that utterances may exhibit degrees of phaticness depending on how much attention the hearer pays to the explicit propositional content of the utterance. Highly conventionalised phatic phrases will be immediately qualified as irrelevant regarding their content, but possibly relevant in their phatic connotations. Hence, in theory (6b) should be less phatic than (6a) and (6c) less than (6b):

(6) a. Hi! How are you?
b. Hi! How are you these days?
c. Hi! How are you after the divorce?

A more interesting issue in my opinion is the fact that the phaticness of conventionally phatic utterances is context-dependent, and there is no guarantee that a phatic interpretation of these conventional utterances will invariably be more relevant than a non-phatic one across contexts. Consider the typically phatic utterances in (7b) and (8b):

(7) a. [Thomas told John this morning that it was ok to go to the beach since the weather was going to be fine; but when they get there, it starts pouring down].
b. John to Thomas: “Nice weather!”

(8) a. [Ann and Rose share the information that the latter is recovering from a serious illness].
b. Ann to Rose: “Hi! How are you?”

These utterances, so often used for phatic purposes, acquire non-phatic meanings when said in the specific contexts (6a) and (7a). In the first case, the utterance acquires an ironical connotation, rather than a phatic one, whereas in the second case, due to the mutuality of information, the question may be interpreted as a genuine request for information, rather than as a phatic utterance.

Furthermore, this proposal in which the inference of phaticness as feelings and emotions tends up attached to the content being transferred to the addressee, allows for the derivation of non-phatic implicatures (beyond the picture of phaticness only as a weak implicature), at
the same time as while the addressee is inferring the phatic desire of sociability and feelings towards connectivity. Consider the tweet by Peter in (9) read by his friend Ann (Yus 2016d):

(9) Making a yummy sandwich and looking forward to tonight’s film on TV ☺ ☺
(10) a. A post such as (9a) indicates that the user is contented with himself.
    b. Peter has recovered from the recent painful breakup with his girlfriend.

As has been suggested above, it is unlikely that Ann will mentally represent Peter’s phatic intention as a weak implicature. Rather, my proposal is that this phatic intention is inferred as non-propositional feelings and desires for sociability attached to the content being processed. This “non-propositional attachment” (desire of connection, of sustaining a chat with peers, of being acknowledged by others, etc.) lingers on and does not interfere with the derivation of other weak implicatures, this time non-phatic (see Kulkarni 2012: 21). For example, Ann may access a background contextual assumption such as (10a) and use it in the derivation of the non-phatic weak implicature in (10b), which is probably not meant by Peter but triggered anyhow by his tweet and derived on Ann’s sole responsibility. Therefore, a phatic utterance may produce relevance both in the non-propositional phatic feelings associated with its emission and in allowing for the derivation of propositional non-phatic implicatures.

3.4. Phatic communication is speaker-centred (but it may be hearer-centred)

The prototypical picture of phatic communication is speaker-centred. It is the speaker that intends to engage in an interaction or aims at sociability and resorts to a phatic utterance for that purpose. This is typically the case of posts on the Internet, where the “sender user” holds a phatic intention and resorts to a prototypical phatic utterance that triggers reactions from peers, their acknowledgement, their willingness for interaction and overall “audience validation.” However, crucially nowadays, the “addressee user” may infer phatic feelings and emotions beyond the sender user’s intention, beyond the propositional quality of interpretation, and even beyond the addressee user’s conscious awareness in their inference. A suitable term for this kind of “leaked” residue would be phatic effects.

In my opinion, these non-intended non-propositional phatic effects are extremely important and also responsible for today’s obsession with looking at the mobile screen while ignoring the person who is opposite us in a context of physical co-presence (phubbing). Indeed, many people complain that their friends compulsively look at their phones instead of paying attention to them or to their face-to-face conversation. A famous cartoon depicted this situation: a woman and a man, the latter is ignoring her while looking at his mobile phone, to which she says “Do you mind if I strap your phone to my forehead so I can pretend you’re looking at me when I talk?” This impolite habit may be explained in pragmatic terms by resorting to the aforementioned terms contextual constraint and non-intended non-propositional effect. The basic explanation for this behaviour would be that a single person, in a physical scenario, exchanging unplanned oral utterances with an interlocutor is not as satisfying as the array of positive constraints and benefits (positive non-propositional effects) that the person obtains through the mobile phone. These positive constraints and benefits are briefly described below.

On the one hand, positive contextual constraints influence the user’s communicative activity especially when sending messages, since the affordances of the mobile phone allow for:
a. Immediacy of communication, constant connection with a lot of ties (unlike a single face-to-face interlocutor).

b. Lack of imposition on the addressee’s reply. Users are relieved when sending typed messages or audio files, since they are devoid of intrusiveness, whereas face-to-face interactions are filled with impositions in order to avoid the embarrassing silence. In this case, as Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) correctly point out, new phatic technologies allow for non-intrusive sending of data and no imposition on an immediate reply.

c. Non-compulsory commitment to the conversation, no need to sustain long interactions. The user is free to stop and leave the current typed conversation on the mobile phone without causing negative effects on the interlocutors, whereas oral conversations demand full commitment so as to develop the dialogue into a relevant outcome.

d. Possibility to plan and design messages. Unlike face-to-face conversations, in which utterances are spontaneous and hence not easy to plan and design, typed texts on a mobile phone screen allow for creative and colourful planning and messages may be revised before touching the “send” icon.

e. Possibility for shy users to keep control of how much information is provided, especially the non-verbal, “exuded” one. In face-to-face scenarios, shy users feel “exposed” to the interlocutor and without control of what information is eventually conveyed. By contrast, typed conversations provide a secure environment within which personal cues are filtered out and only the text communicates the desired information.

f. More playful text-image combinations. Especially for youngsters, the possibility to play with text deformation and text-emoji combinations is highly valued (Yus 2005).

These positive constraints (a-f) lie at the heart of today’s reluctance to phone people and the resort to typed messages or recorded audio files instead. Take WhatsApp, for example (Yus 2016c). The interface currently offers the possibility of free phone calls and video calls but users shy away from this interface option. A recent Spanish meme that went viral stated the following: “First sms, then came WhatsApp, now you record an audio file, and your friend records a reply. If they continue like this, they will end up inventing the telephone” (my translation). The underlying criticism in this meme is that users should use the highly contextualized option of oral communication (phone call) instead of having to type or record messages which are more de-contextualised and therefore more prone to unintended interpretations. Beyond the initial puzzlement at why users do not prefer calls, an explanation may be found in the positive contextual constraints that have just been listed.

On the other hand, positive non-propositional effects influence the user’s estimation of relevance especially when receiving messages. Most of these effects possess a phatic attribute, leak from the act of communication and the user is often not aware of their generation, but these are nevertheless essential to understand why users remain “glued” to their mobile phone screens. Among others, the following non-propositional effects may be listed:

a. Feeling of generation of social presence. One of the phatic offsets of virtual interactions is the generation of social presence, that is, the feeling of being with another person in a mediated environment (Biocca et al. 2003), the degree to which people are perceived as “real” in virtual scenarios, the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction of being connected to other users through the Net (Lowenthal 2010: 130), the awareness of the others accompanied by an engagement in computer-mediated social spaces. As Lomborg (2012: 423) comments regarding blog interactions, these exhibit “social presence and by this means confirms the existence of a social relationship between the commentator and the author...
continuous social presence thus functions as a phatic marker enabling participants to create and maintain rather close relationships.”

Nowadays, mobile instant messaging applications (WhatsApp, WeChat, Line...) are the main sources of social presence, since these apps facilitate real-time dialogues that provide users with a feeling of presence in absence, thus enabling them to feel that all the users are sharing the same space (Park et al. 2014). These apps do generate abundant emotional expressions in terms of social presence, and they can be accessed anywhere and anytime. Certainly, mobile phone apps (for social networking and instant messaging) enable users to perceive high levels of psychological proximity. They provide instant feedback due to ubiquitous connectivity, conveying a variety of social clues including texts, images and voice simultaneously, providing discursive capabilities that express personal feelings and emotions (e.g., emoji, see Yus 2014c), and support varied non-standard forms of language (Choi 2016: 327, Yus 2005).

However, many analysts of social presence are wrong to claim that the design of the interface should be as close as possible to face-to-face communication in order to maintain a high level of social presence. For instance, Park and Sundar (2015: 122) propose that ‘the frequency of users’ interactions with an interface seems to depend on the level of social presence they perceive, thus making it a core design principle for social computing technologies and online communities.” Instead, as has been suggested above, the fact that an interface offers more options for interactions which are closer to face-to-face communication in terms of cues and contextualisation does not guarantee user satisfaction and higher social presence. In fact, many users avoid interfaces that allow for highly contextualised interactions and prefer text-based exchanges since the latter involve more positive contextual constraints. In general, these effects compensate for the fact that the interfaces exhibit a cues-filtered quality, that it, they cannot convey all the range of contextual information that face-to-face interactions do.

b. Feeling of enhanced sociability and social capital. Users may feel that they are in a context of sociability and that so-called “social capital” is exerted from their interactions. The latter may be defined as “investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions” (Lin 1999: 39). As has been pointed out in Sarjanoja et al. (2013: 120), active contribution to social networking sites such as Facebook leads to a perceived increase in social capital, whereas passive consumption of content may lead to a decrease of social capital and increased loneliness. The massive posting of apparently trivial content on these sites may act as capital builder that keeps the feeling of being active, thus having a positive effect on social capital.

c. Feeling of reciprocity and intimacy. The fact that phatic technologies allow for non-stop connection and instant gratification may generate an increased feeling of intimacy with the user’s peers and acquaintances. Posting trivial content acts upon others’ obligation for reciprocity, and receiving messages makes the user feel connected and acknowledged by others.

d. Feeling of enhanced areas of mutuality between interlocutors. According to Relevance Theory, the point of communication is not simply to transfer information to other people, but to achieve a mutual manifestness of information between interlocutors. The creation and management of mutuality is, therefore, a major aim of human communication, and phatic utterances may perform the role of foregrounding areas of mutuality which lead to a sense of connection, belonging or group membership, among others. Padilla Cruz (2007: 705) also
comments on how the effects generated through phatic interactions may increase or enhance the knowledge of the interlocutor, personality, character, behaviour, habits, etc. Furthermore, the hearer can store the assumptions resulting from those effects in encyclopaedic memory as part of the frames or schemata about the interlocutor, so that he/she can access them afterwards. Besides, mutuality extends to the effect of mere awareness of the other interactants, in the sense that a lot of information is built up through phatic exchanges that constitute a sort of “social foundation” on which further interactions may be accomplished (Schandorf 2016: 194).

e. Feeling of connectedness, acknowledgment, mutual awareness. These are probably the most important effects generated through phatic technologies. As Radovanovic and Ragneda (2012: 11-12) acknowledge, what really counts in human interaction is to stay in touch and let others know that the user is also present despite the lack of physical co-presence (see also Hopkins 2014, Graham 2012). An effective means to achieve that awareness of connectivity is to write chained phatic messages, expressing their thoughts freely and making witty comments with the ultimate purpose of keeping contact and reinforcing relationships. Brief messages such as Twitter posts are meant to be sent and processed instantly but the feeling of connection remains across this chained posting behaviour; “they are updates creating the notion and feeling of intimacy by being constantly connected online, in real time with others, globally” and their purpose “at the first glance may appear to lack meaningful information, but in its substance those gestures and communication expressions foster sociability and maintain social connections.” Vetere et al. (2009: 180) also underline the importance of the apparently trivial exchanges of phatic utterances, of chatting idly, of wasting time with others as a valuable expression of mutual acknowledgement and caring. Their analysis revealed that the substance of communication was not always important: “It was the reassurance that they were connected, that a channel of communication was available to them, and that this somehow strengthened and nurtured the relationship. These phatic exchanges were genuinely valued.”

In this sense, Nardi et al. (2000) propose the term outeraction for instant messaging exchanges in which users socially extend to others, thereby enabling information exchange and extended mutuality. These outeractions may occur through what is labelled “awareness moments” which produce an offset of feelings of connection with others (i.e. of mutual manifestness in relevance-theoretic terms). These authors propose instant messaging as valuable for creating a sense of awareness and connection with others. It forms a social bond without exchanging any substantive information. This is corroborated by today’s extensive use of mobile instant messaging applications.

Additionally, Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) propose the term connected presence for the effect of non-stop posting of apparently trivial messages which nevertheless generate a feeling of constant connection, availability and reachability in peers. A new pattern of sociability has emerged in which users are constantly easy to reach through phatic media, blurring the dividing line between presence and absence, and relationships become strings of quasi-continuous exchanges (Miller 2008: 394). In Licoppe and Smoreda’s words, “the boundaries between absence and presence get blurred and subtle experiences of togetherness may develop... Phatic communications becomes increasingly important, because simply keeping in touch may be more important than what is said when one actually gets in touch” (p. 321).

f. Feeling of group membership. Finally, an offset of phatic effects may be centred upon feelings of community or group membership and the support from users therein. Besides, the
user’s communicative strategies may also be shaped by these effects arising from the collectivity. Wang et al. (2012: 88) propose the term *phatic technological habituation* for the cyclic process in which users are connected by their common use of the phatic technology and depend on it to fulfil a specific social purpose. The continuous reliance on this technology may shape special practices in the community. The practices themselves influence the actions of individual users and has the potential of influencing and, eventually, determining individual preferences. The use of the phatic technology therefore becomes a “habit” that shapes members’ actions in the community.

Together with this habituation, a feeling of being socially supported by the group or community is an important phatic effect of online interactions. Many messages posted on social networking sites are intended to generate a feedback from peers, but these effects may also be generated as unintended phatic effects simply from the fact that users respond to one’s messages. Besides, the technological affordances of social networking interfaces allow for the fostering of global communal interactions, the broadcasting of messages to the whole collectivity and yet the parallel capability to receive feedback only from very specific friends (Carr et al. 2016: 386).

3.5. In phatic communication the explicit content is irrelevant (but it may be relevant)

The prototypical picture of phatic communication that has been outlined so far in this chapter is the one in which the hearer initially processes the linguistic content for relevance and if the utterance fails to yield enough effects, the hearer is likely to consider whether some effects might be derived from the evidence presented by the act of communication itself (Žegarac 1998: 337). These speaker-centred effects may be shaped as weak phatic implicatures of a propositional nature (the default relevance-theoretic proposal) or as non-propositional phatic feelings and emotions attached to the content being inferred (the proposal in this chapter). In addition, the hearer may use the initially trivial content of the phatic utterance to derive a number of hearer-centred non-phatic weak implicatures which are not meant by the speaker but are derived by the hearer’s sole responsibility. Finally, the user may also derive unintended non-propositional phatic effects, not meant by the speaker but nevertheless important to maximise the relevance of the act of communication. It has been claimed in this chapter that these phatic effects are crucial if we are to understand today’s obsession with engaging in communication through mobile phone interfaces.

However, Internet-mediated communication allows for more possibilities across the propositional/non-propositional and intended/unintended dichotomies. Firstly, phatic messages, whose content is typically devoid of interest, may end up generating a relevant interpretive outcome in their own right. Take tweets, for example. Although they are often trivial and their content lacks interest, their accumulation may actually be very relevant. The non-stop posting of trivial tweets allows for an *ambient awareness* (Thompson 2008) of what the user is currently engaged in, a kind of “presence in the absence” that dilutes the feeling of separation between the user and followers. Furthermore, these tweets generate cumulative background information on the user from the information provided by these apparently trivial posts. This background is important since it constitutes a preliminary context upon which subsequent interactions with the user may be constructed.

Secondly, non-trivial information may acquire phatic connotations or encourage eventual phatic interactions. *Facebook* entries, for example, may trigger subsequent phatic interactions in terms of comments and dialogues. Actually, many posts are published because their
inherent interest is likely to produce a number of replies and interactions, and not because the 
user wants to provide friends with relevant information, as it would initially appear to be, 
even though the users themselves may be rather reluctant to admit this covert intention. An 
extreme case in this direction is what in Yus (2014b) has labelled interactivity triggers, posts 
that are mainly meant to trigger reactions from peers. Examples quoted in that study include 
the ones listed in (11):

(11) a. Ya he sido aceptada como profe en el IES Tirant Lo Blanc!!!!y voy a ir con 
mi compi Cristina!!!
[I’ve been accepted as teacher at Tirant Lo Blanc High School!!!! and I’ll be 
there with my mate Cristina!!!].
c. Importante: mi movil ha muerto... Hasta el viernes no tendré, ya veremos si 
sobrevivo... jajaja
[Important: my mobile has died... I won’t have one till Friday, let’s see if I can 
survive… hahaha].
d. Mañana a estas horas estare LoWcOsTeAnDooooo!! Con #bego!! :)
[By this time tomorrow I’ll be lowcosting!!! With Bego].
e. Ya tengo mi títul de Curso Básico de Peluqueria! Jijiji
[I’ve got my certificate from the basic course in hairdressing! Hihihi].

In short, new possibilities open up for phatic communication beyond the prototypical 
scenario of irrelevant explicit content and relevant phatic implicatures. Indeed, sixteen cases 
arise from a combination of the following parameters: (a) the intention as phatic or non-
phatic; (b) the discourse as phatic or non-phatic; (c) the addressee derives a number of 
propositional phatic implicatures (as probably intended) or not; and (d) the addressee derives 
a number of unintended non-propositional phatic effects or not. The resulting taxonomy 
ranges from the most phatic scenario (first case) to the least phatic one (last case). A 
description of the sixteen cases follows.

Case 1.

Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve that, he/she 
produces a typically phatic message. The addressee user notices and is fully aware of the 
phatic quality of the sender user’s message and draws a number of phatic (weak) implicatures 
of a propositional kind. At the same time, the addressee user feels a number of non-
propositional (and not overtly intended) phatic effects leaking from the interpretation of this 
message; he/she feels acknowledged, valued, part of the non-stop connection with peers such 
as the sender user, satisfied at being addressed for a conversation. These effects compensate 
for the lack of relevance that the sender user’s content produces.

Case 2.

Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve that, he/she produces a typically phatic message. The addressee user notices and is fully aware of the phatic quality of the sender user’s message and draws a number of phatic (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind. At the same time, the addressee user feels a number of non-propositional (and not overtly intended) effects, but these effects are not of a phatic kind. For example, the addressee user may update his/her feelings towards the sender user, without these acquiring a typically phatic quality (socialisation, bonding, connectedness).

Case 3.
Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve that, he/she produces a typically phatic message. The addressee user draws (or not) a number of non-phatic weak implicatures of a propositional kind. At the same time, the addressee user feels a number of non-propositional (and not overtly intended) phatic effects leaking from the interpretation of this message.

Case 4.
Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising, and to achieve that, he/she produces a typically phatic message. However, the phatic intention is unsuccessful, since the addressee user neither draws phatic weak implicatures of a propositional kind, nor obtains phatic effects beyond the act of communication. A typical case is the phatic message that is interpreted as a genuinely relevant message in itself, and the addressee user misunderstands the sender user’s intentions.

Case 5.
Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve this phatic goal, the user resorts to an objectively interesting message, one whose content creates lots of expectations of relevance, and therefore is bound to “break the ice.” The addressee user notices and is fully aware of the phatic intention of the sender user’s message and draws a number of phatic (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind. Besides, he/she obtains
relevance from the explicit interpretation. At the same time, the addressee user feels a number of non-propositional (and not overtly intended) phatic effects leaking from the interpretation of this message, which add to the overall relevance of the utterance.

Case 6.
Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve this phatic goal, the user resorts to an objectively interesting message, one whose content creates lots of expectations of relevance, and therefore is bound to “break the ice.” The addressee user draws a number of phatic (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind, besides obtaining relevance from the explicit interpretation. By contrast, the addressee user does not obtain any non-propositional (and not overtly intended) phatic effects leaking from the interpretation of this message.

Case 7.
Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve this phatic goal, the user resorts to an objectively interesting message, one whose content creates lots of expectations of relevance, and therefore is bound to “break the ice.” The addressee user draws (or not) a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind but not of a phatic quality, besides obtaining relevance from the explicit interpretation. Additionally, the addressee user obtains a number of non-propositional (and not overtly intended) phatic effects leaking from the interpretation of this message, which add to the overall relevance of the utterance.

Case 8.
Intention: phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.

The sender user wants to initiate an interaction, aims at socialising. To achieve this phatic goal, the user resorts to an objectively interesting message, one whose content creates lots of expectations of relevance, and therefore is bound to “break the ice.” The addressee user draws (or not) a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind but not of a phatic quality, besides obtaining relevance from the explicit interpretation. The addressee does not obtain phatic effects leaking from the interpretation of this message, which means that the phatic intention is misunderstood. A typical case is the phatic message that is interpreted as a genuinely relevant message in itself.
Case 9.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user produces a typically phatic message but he/she does not hold an overtly phatic intention. For example using a typically phatic “how are you” as a genuine request for information. The addressee user incorrectly draws a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind and a phatic quality. Besides, beyond the user’s intentions, the addressee user obtains a number of phatic non-propositional effects that make the act of communication relevant in itself.

Case 10.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or none-phatic.

The sender user produces a typically phatic message but he/she does not hold an overtly phatic intention. For example using a typically phatic “how are you” as a genuine request for information. The addressee user incorrectly draws a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind and a phatic quality. Furthermore, the addressee user does not obtain phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, or the ones obtained are not of a phatic kind.

Case 11.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user produces a typically phatic message but he/she does not hold an overtly phatic intention. For example using a typically phatic “how are you” as a genuine request for information. The addressee user may incorrectly draw (or not) a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind but not of a phatic quality. Besides, the addressee user does obtain phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, which might have added to the overall relevance of the act of communication as a whole.

Case 12.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.
The sender user produces a typically phatic message but he/she does not hold an overtly phatic intention. For example, using a typically phatic “how are you” as a genuine request for information. The addressee user may incorrectly draw (or not) a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind and a phatic quality. Additionally, the addressee user does not obtain phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, which might have added to the overall relevance of the act of communication, or the ones obtained are not of a phatic kind.

Case 13.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user produces a message that does not fit the typical phatic quality, and he/she does not hold a phatic intention. The addressee user incorrectly draws a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind and a phatic quality. However, the addressee user obtains phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, which add to the overall relevance of the act of communication.

Case 14.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.

The sender user produces a message that does not fit the typical phatic quality, and he/she does not hold a phatic intention. The addressee user incorrectly draws a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind but not of a phatic quality. However, the addressee user obtains phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, which might have added to the overall relevance of the act of communication.

Case 15.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): phatic.

The sender user produces a message that does not fit the typical phatic quality, and he/she does not hold a phatic intention. The addressee user draws (or not) a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind but not of a phatic quality. However, the addressee user obtains phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, which add to the overall relevance of the act of communication.

Case 16.
Intention: non-phatic.
Discourse (on a phatic/non-phatic continuum): non-phatic.
Weak implicatures: none or non-phatic.
Phatic effects (non-propositional feelings or emotions): none or non-phatic.

The sender user produces a message that does not fit the typical phatic quality, and he/she does not hold a phatic intention. The addressee user draws (or not) a number of (weak) implicatures of a propositional kind but not of a phatic quality. Besides, the addressee user obtains no phatic non-propositional effects out of the processing of this act of communication, which might have added to the overall relevance of the act of communication.

Concluding remarks

Phatic communication is pervasive on the Internet nowadays. Besides the typical form of phatic communication as intended, propositional and derived as a weak implicature, this chapter proposes new ways and possibilities for Internet-mediated discourse to result in phatic and relevant interpretive outcomes, to the extent that what keeps users addicted to their phones and computers is often not so much the intentional phatic form of communication, but the phatic residue that leaks from Internet acts of communication, beyond the sender user’s intention and beyond the addressee user’s conscious awareness. This “residue” is made up of non-propositional feelings and emotions and these non-propositional effects of a phatic kind very often compensate for the lack of interest that the propositional content objectively conveys. This emphasis of the chapter on non-propositionality underlines the importance of feelings and emotions in everyday human communication, including Internet-mediated communication, which is also stressed throughout the other chapters in this book.

One of the main conclusions from the analysis in this chapter is that this extended repertoire of possibilities opens up new ways for addressing and understanding the complicated phenomenon of phatic communication on the Net and for explaining it in cognitive pragmatics terms.

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